

## Bad jump and injuries can't keep this Red Devil down

Story and photo

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For the majority of paratroopers of the 173d Airborne Brigade, the jump into northern Iraq – while far from uneventful – was safe. Only a handful of injuries, none of them serious, resulted. One of those injured, Sgt. Jonathan Brooks, however is making his way slowly back to his unit.

Brooks' ordeal started the same way all the soldiers of the 173d Abn Bde who jumped in started. On Sunday night, March 23d, he received a phone call telling him to, "kiss the wife goodbye in the morning, and come into work."

Brooks' wife, Rachel, and their two children Sierra, 4, and Sarah, 3, said their goodbyes and Brooks made his way into work.

"My wife was glad I was leaving—because she knew that was what I wanted to do," Brooks said. "She's just like any other wife and worries about me, and doesn't want anything to happen to me."

Upon arrival on post, the soldiers were told to make their final preparations. The last of the medical requirements were administered, extra gear was prepared for the mission, and the order was issued.

By 6 a.m. the next morning, Brooks and the mortar team he is the squad leader of, arrived at Aviano Air Base.

"Everybody knew what we were doing, everyone was in the right place doing what they needed to do," he explained.

"This is probably one of the best-trained brigades in the Army. We were just hanging out, waiting," he said with grin.

While by no means muscle-bound, Brooks presents a commanding presence – with a barrel-like chest and the build of a man who has lived his life in the infantry. Easy going and good-natured, Brooks and his soldiers, along with the rest of the Brigade, boarded planes that everyone knew were bound for Iraq.

It was a pretty good flight, an easy flight, no turbulence, no nothing. The Air Force had done their job and we had done our job. But everyone had a really heavy pack, 100 to 110 lbs each, he said.

Even the infamous 16,000- foot drop everyone was saying to be careful about couldn't even be felt, he said.

"I was supposed to be the 28th jumper to go, but I ended up being the 50th," he said.

"Another fellow from the opposite end of the aircraft and I jumped and started to take each other's air from the chutes," he said, explaining an occurrence where one parachute, directly above another parachute, affects the rate of descent of the jumper below.

It was dark, but not pitch black, according to Brooks.

"You could see ahead about 50 or 60 meters," he said. "When I saw the ground rise up, there was no time to react. I hit it pretty hard. I tried to get up and, when I finally did get up and started to gather my gear. I could tell I was hurt.

"I didn't know how bad it was until I started walking and got about a couple hundred meters. I finally just fell over," he said. "I pulled out my radio and said 'This is where I am, come get me when you can.'"

Brooks began to wait. It would be some time before help would arrive.

"I had another soldier with me so it wasn't bad," he said. But Brooks unashamedly admits that he was afraid.

"I don't want to say I was scared to death, but everyone has that fear," he said. "Everyone knows what they have to do, but that fear is still there."

Brooks' platoon sergeant showed up with a few other soldiers and picked him up. The next stop was a visit to the brigade's physician's assistant. The PA was able to quickly access something was wrong.

"I was walking like I was three feet tall," Brooks joked.

After a few hours observation, Brooks was informed that he was going to Landstuhl Army Medical Center in Germany on the first aircraft available.

By 2 p.m. the next day, now safely at Landstuhl, the process of diagnosing the problem began. Oddly, and thankfully, nothing was wrong, but the process took a few days. While waiting for the prognosis, Brooks called his wife.

"When my wife answered, I told her where I was and that I should be home in about a week," he said.

"I was really shocked," Rachel Brooks said. "I had gotten word, like all the other spouses, that the jump went off well and everything was okay."

Rachel asked what was wrong and he told her. In perhaps what could only be attributed to the wife of a soldier, she simply replied, "Oh. Okay."

"Originally, I wasn't going to call her," Brooks said. "I wanted to just show up at the house and surprise her, but that didn't work out." Instead, Rachel and the children came to pick him up at brigade headquarters.

"I didn't tell our children that we were going to pick up their daddy," she said. "All I told them was that there was somebody on the other side of the door who wanted to see them. When they saw it was their daddy, they just got so excited."

But Brooks wanted to rejoin his men. When he told his wife he wanted to go back to his unit, she asked him to make sure he was really physically okay – but she is a soldier's wife and understood.

"That's my job," he said. "It's a noncommissioned officer's job to be with his soldiers. It's like second nature. I have a family, but I also have a military family and I take care of them, just as they take care of me."

Brooks' is taking a few things back into Iraq with him that he didn't have when he jumped in that dark morning. He's taking some valuable lessons to pass to his soldiers and their families.

"Make sure you have all of your Power's of Attorney done, or updated. Not just a general Power of Attorney but any specific ones," he said. "It seems that although they say the general one is good enough, when push comes to shove it may not be.

"Get involved in the Family Readiness Groups, they have a lot of resources available, it's a great program. There is one other thing that Brooks is taking back to Iraq – a fatter wallet. On May 1st he became Staff Sgt. Brooks.